

Leave it to the experts

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Electrical safety must remain the domain of the skilled electrician, says Paul Collins

Everyone connected with a property is responsible for ensuring that its electrical installation is well maintained and checked on a regular basis. But when does being vigilant start to become dangerous?

The past few years have seen a huge increase in the number of courses and training programmes that claim to turn non-competent, non-technical people into skilled and accredited inspectors who can carry out simple electrical checks. Although I advocate improved safety in the home, encouraging people who are not directly connected with the electrical industry to carry out inspections is confusing and potentially dangerous.

Reporting on electrics is fraught with difficulty for surveyors

The charity [Electrical Safety First \(ESF\)](#) offers a range of free information on its website, covering visual inspections and checks such as:

- ensuring that plugs and sockets are not scorched or damaged; or
- that the consumer unit has residual current device (RCD) protection.

This is something everyone should be doing; but for anything more than a basic inspection, ESF stresses the need to call a registered electrician.

Graham Ellis, associate director of the RICS Residential Professional Group, stresses:

?Reporting on electrics is fraught with difficulty for surveyors. They should follow RICS professional statements and guidance to carry out inspections and report in accordance the agreed level of service. Surveyors should be very careful and not present themselves as experts in electrics.

?However, they are expected to have a certain amount of knowledge and understanding and to report their findings factually, depending on what level of survey is undertaken. In the absence of a current safety certificate, the client should be advised to obtain a further investigation, condition rating 3, from an appropriately qualified person belonging to a recognised organisation.?

RICS Home safety professional statement

When providing any service, a surveyor has to agree standard terms of engagement with the client at the outset. This follows the criteria set out in a description of service, in which the prospective client is advised what the surveyor will or will not do.

The [Condition report](#) (survey level 1), [HomeBuyer report](#) (level 2) and [Building survey](#) (level 3) all state:

?Services are generally hidden within the construction of the property. This means that only the visible parts of the available services can be inspected, and the surveyor does not carry out specialist tests.

?The visual inspection cannot assess the efficiency or safety of electrical, gas or other energy sources; plumbing, heating or drainage installations (or whether they meet current regulations); or the inside condition of any chimney, boiler or other flue.?

There is a slight variance between the levels, but the overall message is that the visual inspection cannot assess the efficiency or safety of electrical sources.

Level of service

Surveyors are given guidance as to what is required during their site inspection. In the case of the Condition and HomeBuyer reports, the services are visually inspected. The surveyor is not required to ensure these services work efficiently and safely or that they comply with current regulations; they should inform the client and their advisers of any limitations to their inspection of the property, and comment in the text box at the top of the page where an element(s) or part(s) of it that would normally be inspected under the terms of the report could not be accessed for whatever reason. Further comment can be included in the appropriate element text box.

The surveyor should state in the report whether any services are turned off, and they must not turn them on. A condition rating must be applied to each of the services and comments made on the elements detailed in the box. Accessible parts of the wiring are visually inspected without removing or undoing fittings; no tests whatsoever are carried out to the system or appliances.

Building survey (level 3)

At this level, all building service installations, whether mains or privately supplied, are visually inspected. The inspection should be sufficient for the surveyor to form an overall opinion on:

- the type of installation;
- the materials used;
- its apparent age;
- visible condition; and
- the need for further investigation.

They are not expected to test the installations or appliances other than through their normal everyday operation or comment on design calculations.

For all services, the surveyor advises the client that further tests by appropriate specialists will be necessary if assurance as to condition or capability is required. The inspection should be carried out without risk of injury to the surveyor or damage to the property.

Encouraging people who are not directly connected with the electrical industry to carry out inspections is potentially dangerous

The surveyor should inform the client and their advisers of any limitations to their inspection and give reasons for this in the text box at the top of the page. For example, where an element(s) or part(s) thereof would normally be inspected under the terms of the survey but could not because, for instance, meters were inaccessible, or a drain cover was not present or could not be lifted, the surveyor reports this here. Any further comment can be included in the appropriate element text box. Risk and safety issues should be cross-referenced to section J on risks.

If any services are turned off, the surveyor reports this and does not turn them on. A condition rating must be applied to each of the services and comments made on the elements detailed below. The checklists under G1 Electricity may be helpful during the inspection as prompts, but they are not exhaustive. Accessible parts of the wiring are visually inspected without removing or undoing fittings.

The surveyor reports on:

- location and type of incoming supply, meter and switchgear;
- nature of visible wiring;
- availability of socket outlets; and

- nature of artificial lighting.

Concerning the demands of computer equipment, the surveyor should not turn off the mains supply or test RCDs, except with the owner or occupier's express permission. There should be an electricity safety warning and subsequent reporting on the installation and its general condition, availability of Part P notification or any other associated certification including a recent Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR).

Section G of the report format tells the client that services are generally hidden in the construction of the property. This means surveyors can only inspect the visible parts, and do not carry out specialist tests. The visual inspection cannot assess the services to make sure they work efficiently and safely, or meet modern standards. The surveyor then reports accordingly.

Condition rating elements

[RICS Home surveys](#) rate the condition of elements of the building, including the services. Condition rating 3 defects are serious and/or in urgent need of repair, replacement or investigation. This rating must be used where the surveyor feels unable to reach the necessary conclusion with reasonable confidence and includes any defect that presents a safety threat.

Even if it seems there may be nothing untoward with the electrics, where there is no

Kitemarked documentary evidence such as a Periodic Inspection Report or EICR then the surveyor must recommend further investigation and apply a condition rating 3. The Kitemark is a UK-quality certification mark for products and services, owned and supported by the [British Standards Institution](#), and is most frequently used to certify products for which safety is paramount, including electrical installations.

Similarly, if the surveyor is concerned about the condition of a hidden part of the building, can only see part of a defect or does not have the specialist knowledge to assess part of the property fully, they may recommend further investigations. The appropriate inspection and testing that is, an EICR must be carried out by a skilled person who belongs to a government-approved registration body.

Advice for surveyors

The following statement is printed at the start of section G1 ? Electrical Safety warning ? of the [HomeBuyer report](#).

ESF recommends that a registered electrician checks the property and its electrical fittings, and that a periodic inspection and testing is carried out at the following times:

- **tenanted properties:** every 5 years or at each change of occupancy, whichever is sooner; and
- **owner-occupied properties:** every 10 years.

Note that in Scotland, it is now a legal requirement that landlords in the private rented sector carry out an Electrical Installation Condition Report (EICR) at least every 5 years.

The surveyor should describe the installation and its general condition, including:

- mains supply;
- residual current device or miniature circuit breakers;
- on-peak/off-peak;
- location of meter and consumer unit/fuse board;
- supplementary bonding in the usual places;
- condition of visible wiring;
- condition of a sample of the range of light fittings and switchgear;
- fixed electrical appliances, including heaters, storage radiators, electric showers, instant water heaters (see also G5 Water heating);
- nature of electrical fittings, bath and shower rooms; and
- external installations, such as garages, outbuildings, external sockets, garden lighting, water feature pumps.

The surveyor should check if the following documentation is available:

- [Part P of the Building Regulations](#) certification, where rewiring/alterations to the installation have been carried out after 1 January 2005; and
- a recent Periodic Inspection Report or EICR.

For more advice, please visit [Electrical Safety First](#).

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Further information

- NICEIC is the UK's leading professional body for registered electricians. It has been

assessing the competence of the profession for more than 60 years and currently maintains a roll of more than 19,000 approved contractors. The organisation works closely with [RICS](#) and the [National Landlords Association](#) to remind members about their responsibilities and outline the potential dangers of electricians in a property.

- Related competencies include: [Fire safety](#) , [Housing maintenance, repair and improvement](#) , and [Inspection](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Property journal* (December 2016/January 2017)